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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAL KDEM PINR

SUBJECT: "ABU SAOOD:" (ONE OF) ARAFAT'S REVILED GATEKEEPERS

REF: A) JERUSALEM 1927

¶1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY CONSUL GENERAL JOHN E. HERBST,  
REASON 1.5(B).

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SUMMARY  
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¶2. (C) PALESTINIANS INCREASINGLY COMPLAIN THAT ARAFAT'S COTERIE OF "GATEKEEPERS" ARE EXERCISING A DISPROPORTIONATE AMOUNT OF POWER AND PREVENTING PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEGITIMATE BUSINESS WITH ARAFAT FROM GETTING AN AUDIENCE. MANY PALESTINIANS BELIEVE THIS GROUP IS PREVENTING ARAFAT FROM HEARING FROM KEY CONSTITUENTS WHO COULD GIVE HIM A SENSE OF THE DEEP LEVEL OF MISTRUST AND ALIENATION THAT MANY PALESTINIANS FEEL TOWARD THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA). ONE GATEKEEPER -- "ABU SAOOD" -- PULLS A PARTICULARLY NEGATIVE REACTION. HE IS A THIRD GRADE DROP OUT WHO STARTED AS A COFFEE BOY WITH FATAH IN AMMAN THIRTY YEARS AGO AND HAS NOW RISEN TO A POSITION OF CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE. ABU SAOOD'S RECENT CONFRONTATION WITH FATAH WEST BANK HIGHER COMMITTEE HEAD MARWAN BARGHOUTI AND THE POLITICAL BATTLE IT HAS HELPED KICKED OFF IS ONLY THE LATEST EXAMPLE OF THIS GROUP'S INFLUENCE. THE FOLLOWING PIECE PROFILES ABU SAOOD. IT IS GLEANED FROM THE COMMENTS AND INFORMATION GATHERED BY CONGEN FSN.

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WHO IS ABU SAOOD?  
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¶3. (C) SA'ED ZAHRAN ALLAAN, KNOWN COMMONLY BY HIS NOM DE GUERRE "ABU SAOOD," WAS BORN AROUND 1949 INTO A FAMILY OF NINE IN THE WEST BANK VILLAGE OF DEIR ABU MASH'AL, LOCATED NORTHWEST OF RAMALLAH NEAR THE GREEN LINE. HIS FATHER, A PEASANT, WANTED HIM TO GET A GOOD EDUCATION AND SENT HIM TO SCHOOL IN THE NEIGHBORING VILLAGE OF ABOUD. AFTER FAILING TWICE TO PASS THE THIRD GRADE, HE DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL AND JOINED HIS FATHER IN WORKING THE LAND.

¶4. (C) WHEN HE WAS ABOUT 20, ABU SAOOD MOVED TO AMMAN ON THE ADVICE OF A RELATIVE WHO TOLD HIM THAT HE COULD FIND HIM A JOB IN SAUDI ARABIA OR KUWAIT. THE PROMISED JOB NEVER MATERIALIZED AND THE DESTITUTE ABU SAOOD WAS FORCED TO WORK AT DAILY LABOR JOBS IN AMMAN'S VEGETABLE MARKET TO SUPPORT HIMSELF. THROUGH A RELATIVE, HE MANAGED TO LAND A JOB WITH FATAH IN THE LATE 60'S AS THE COFFEE SERVER IN THE OFFICE OF THE LATE FATAH LEADER SALAH KHALAF (ABU IYAD). (NOTE: COFFEE AND TEA SERVERS ARE FOUND IN VIRTUALLY ALL PALESTINIANS OFFICES IN DEFERENCE TO THE ARAB CUSTOM OF SERVING VISITORS REFRESHMENT. COFFEE SERVERS CAN BE AGING MEMBERS OF THE OFFICE WHO STILL NEED A STIPEND OR AMBITIOUS YOUNG OPERATORS SEEKING UPWARD MOBILITY THROUGH DAILY CONTACT WITH THEIR BOSSSES. END NOTE.)

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ABU SAOOD'S CLIMB  
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¶ 15. (C) FOLLOWING THE PLO'S EXPULSION FROM JORDAN IN 1970, ABU IYAD AND ABU SAOOD RELOCATED TO BEIRUT. HE WAS PROMOTED TO MESSENGER BOY, WHICH REQUIRED HIM TO DELIVER MESSAGES AND LETTERS FROM ABU IYAD TO THE DIFFERENT PLO OFFICES, INCLUDING ARAFAT'S. FATAH CONTACTS AND MEMBERS OF ARAFAT'S OFFICE SAY THAT WHENEVER THE OUT-GOING ABU SAOOD WENT TO ARAFAT'S OFFICE HE SPENT EXTRA TIME BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS WITH THE CHAIRMAN'S STAFF AND BODY GUARDS. HE ALSO REPORTED THE GOINGS-ON AT THE ARAFAT OFFICE TO ABU IYAD. IT IS SAID THAT DR. RAMZI KHOURY, A KEY FIGURE AT THE CHAIRMAN'S OFFICE AND LONG-TIME CONFIDANT ARAFAT, BECAME AWARE OF ABU SAOOD'S REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES. KHOURY DECLINED TO TURN ABU SAOOD IN TO ARAFAT, AND INSTEAD OFFERED HIM A GOOD JOB IN ARAFAT'S OFFICE IN THE FUTURE IF HE BEGAN REPORTING ON ABU IYAD'S OFFICE. ABU SAOOD ACCEPTED AND BEGAN INFORMING ON ABU IYAD TO KHOURY.

¶ 16. (C) IN THE LATE 1970'S, ABU SAOOD MOVED TO ARAFAT'S OFFICE, AS KHOURY HAD PROMISED. DURING HIS INITIAL STINT, HE ANSWERED TELEPHONE CALLS, RECEIVED GUESTS AND SHOWED THEM TO THE CHAIRMAN'S OFFICE. HE WAS NOT GIVEN ANY OFFICIAL TITLE. ACCORDING TO MOHAMMED ADWAN, THE HEAD OF FOREIGN MEDIA RELATIONS FOR ARAFAT'S OFFICE, ABU SAOOD PROVED HIMSELF USEFUL TO ARAFAT THROUGH HIS ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS BETWEEN PLO FIGHTERS AND MEMBERS OF THE CHRISTIAN PHALANGIST MILITIA, MANY OF WHOM HE HUNG OUT WITH IN BEIRUT'S BARS AND BROTHELS.

¶ 17. (C) THE MOST FAMOUS (AND COLORFUL) STORY ABOUT THIS PERIOD IN ABU SAOOD'S LIFE ALSO LED TO HIS NEXT "PROMOTION." ACCORDING TO THE STORY/LEGEND, DURING THE PLO'S BEIRUT DAYS ARAFAT BECAME VERY AGITATED WITH SA'AD SALAAM, THE EDITOR OF A MAJOR CHRISTIAN NEWSPAPER WHO CONSTANTLY WROTE DISPARAGING STORIES ABOUT HIM. DURING A DINNER WITH HIS AIDES, THE CHAIRMAN COMPLAINED ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN EDITOR AND ASKED WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH HIM. WHILE SOME OF THE CHAIRMAN'S AIDES HELPFULLY VOLUNTEERED TO ASSASSINATE THE EDITOR, ABU SAOOD SOUGHT THE CHAIRMAN OUT WITH ANOTHER IDEA IN MIND. HE SAID THAT HE HAD HEARD OF ARAFAT'S DISPUTE WITH QLAAM QOULD SOLVE THE PROBLEM. HE TOLD A DISBELIEVING ARAFAT THAT HE WOULD BRING THE EDITOR, IN PERSON, TO THE HIS OFFICE AND HAVE HIM APOLOGIZE TO HIM AND PROMISE NEVER TO WRITE ANYTHING INSULTING AGAINST THE CHAIRMAN AGAIN. THE CHAIRMAN IS SAID TO HAVE LAUGHED AT ABU SAOOD.

¶ 18. (C) THE NEXT DAY, HOWEVER, ABU SAOOD SHOWED UP AT THE CHAIRMAN'S OFFICE ACCCOMPANIED BY THE EDITOR. TRUE TO ABU SAOOD'S PLEDGE, THE EDITOR APOLOGIZED TO ARAFAT AND PROMISED NOT TO WRITE ANYTHING INSULTING ABOUT HIM AGAIN. AFTER THE EDITOR LEFT ARAFAT'S OFFICE, THE CHAIRMAN DEMANDED THAT ABU SAOOD REVEAL HOW HE MANAGED TO INDUCE THE EDITOR TO APOLOGIZE. ABU SAOOD REPORTEDLY REVEALED THAT HE HAD BLACKMAILED THE EDITOR OVER A SEXUAL INDISCRETION.

¶ 19. (C) ABU SAOOD OBTAINED HIS CURRENT TITLE AND A NEW LEVEL OF INFLUENCE IN 1992 IN AN EQUALLY DRAMATIC FASHION -- HE LITERALLY PUT HIS LIFE ON THE LINE FOR THE CHAIRMAN. ABU SAOOD WAS TRAVELING WITH ARAFAT WHEN HIS PLANE CRASHED IN THE LIBYAN DESERT. REALIZING THAT A CRASH WAS IMMINENT, ABU SAOOD REPORTEDLY RUSHED THE CHAIRMAN TO THE TAIL SECTION OF THE AIRPLANE AND MOBILIZED ARAFAT'S BODYGUARDS TO SURROUND THE CHAIRMAN, ACTING ESSENTIALLY AS "HUMAN PILLOWS." ABU SAOOD HIMSELF EMBRACED ARAFAT TO HELP ABSORB THE SHOCK OF IMPACT. ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS ARAFAT DID AFTER HIS RECOVERY WAS AWARD ABU SAOOD THE OFFICIAL TITLE OF "HEAD OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PROTOCOL" AT HIS OFFICE.

¶10. (C) ABU SAOOD, A SHORT, PORTLY MAN WITH A GRUFF DEMEANOR, IS NOW WELL-KNOWN TO ANYONE WHO VISITS ARAFAT'S OFFICE. HE DETERMINES -- FOR MOST VISITORS -- WHETHER THEY GET AN AUDIENCE WITH THE CHAIRMAN. AS HIS POWER HAS GROWN, HE HAS ALSO BEGUN TO BE DISPATCHED TO EVENTS TO "REPRESENT" ARAFAT'S OFFICE. WHEN HE ATTENDS AN EVENT IT IS UNIVERSALLY INTERPRETED AS A NOT-SO-SUBTLE MEANS OF INTIMIDATION. FOR EXAMPLE, HE APPEARED AT THE PALESTINIAN COUNCIL SESSIONS LAST SUMMER WHEN THE COUNCIL WAS BALKING AT APPROVING ARAFAT'S NEW CABINET. WHEN HEATED DEBATES ERUPTED, ABU SAOOD WOULD SHOW UP TO "LOBBY" QUARRELING COUNCIL MEMBERS. COUNCIL MEMBERS UNANIMOUSLY SAW ABU SAOOD'S PRESENCE AS BOTH A SIGN OF HOW SERIOUSLY ARAFAT WAS ABOUT SECURING APPROVAL FOR HIS CABINET AND A CLEAR INDICATION THAT VOTING THE WRONG WAY WOULD CARRY A HIGH POLITICAL PRICE.

¶11. (C) MORE RECENTLY, ABU SAOOD WAS INVOLVED IN A CONFRONTATION WITH FATAH WEST BANK HIGHER COMMITTEE HEAD MARWAN BARGHOUTI (REF). THE EVENT HELPED UNLEASH THE CURRENT ROUND OF INTENSE POLITICAL WRANGLING THAT IS SEEING ELEMENTS IN ARAFAT'S OLD GUARD TRY TO MANEUVER GRASSROOTS FATAH ACTIVISTS OUT OF POSITIONS OF POWER. IN A SIGN OF THE DISTRUST WITH WHICH ABU SAOOD IS VIEWED, MANY PALESTINIANS SEE HIM AS ACTING INDEPENDENTLY AGAINST BARGHOUTI IN HIS CAPACITY AS THE SELF-APPOINTED OVERSEER OF THE PALESTINIAN DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENE.

¶12. (C) THE FACT THAT ABU SAOOD EITHER WIELDS THIS KIND OF POWER, OR IS ONLY PERCEIVED TO, PROVOKES A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF FEAR AND LOATHING AMONG MANY POLITICALLY ACTIVE PALESTINIANS. A NUMBER OF PALESTINIANS HAVE RECENTLY INSISTED THAT EVEN MOHAMMED RASHID, ARAFAT'S POWERFUL ECONOMIC ADVISOR, HAS HAD TROUBLE GETTING PAST ABU SAOOD. WHILE THIS IS HARD FOR US TO BELIEVE, IT DOES underscore THE EPIC NATURE OF ABU SAOOD'S REPUTATION AMONG PALESTINIANS.

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COMMENT  
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¶13. (C) ABU SAOOD'S RISE FROM UNEDUCATED MANUAL LABORER AND COFFEE BOY TO ONE OF ARAFAT'S MOST TRUSTED AIDES OFFERS A SNAPSHOT OF THE HIGHLY PERSONALIZED WAY THAT ARAFAT DOES BUSINESS AND THE DIVIDENDS THAT LOYALTY CAN PAY. ABU SAOOD IS A FREQUENT TARGET OF CRITICISM FROM PALESTINIANS WHO BELIEVE THIS IS A POOR WAY TO CONDUCT AFFAIRS. THE CRITICISM ALSO STEMS FROM PALESTINIANS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH HIM AS A NASTY INDIVIDUAL WHO IS MOST COMMONLY DESCRIBED BY CONSULATE CONTACTS AS A "THUG." (BIONOTE: ABU SAOOD IS MARRIED AND HAS ONE OR TWO DAUGHTERS. HE DOES NOT SPEAK ENGLISH.)

HERBST